

# John Calvin as Teacher

David L. Puckett

FOR ALMOST FIVE centuries, when Christians have thought of John Calvin, the theological content of his teaching has been the focus. He has been especially identified with his teaching on man's depravity and inability to turn to God and the correlated teachings of God's sovereignty

in salvation and predestination. His teaching on church government and on baptism and the Lord's Supper have had inestimable influence on the development of Reformed doctrine. The persistent influence of his thought is still evident among evangelical scholars. As recently as twenty five years ago, a survey of members of the Evangelical Theological Society found Calvin to be the individual with the single greatest influence on society members in their scholarly work. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* handily beat out George Eldon Ladd's *Theology of the New Testament* as the academic book that had made

the greatest impact on members' scholarship and the direction of their academic work.<sup>1</sup> It seems that Calvin has continued to teach the church

through his written work—especially through the *Institutes*.

Calvin's educational background and personal connections prepared him for a ministry of teaching through the written word. As a young man, he participated in an intellectual movement that scholars today often refer to as Christian humanism.<sup>2</sup> A number of the leaders of the early Reformation were drawn from this movement. Many of them looked to the great Desiderius Erasmus as a role model and source of inspiration and were, like him, persuaded of the need for an educational project to remedy the ignorance of the Bible in their day.<sup>3</sup> Erasmus and others attempted to address the problem, producing a vast array of resources for Bible study. Among these were new texts, translations, and paraphrases, all published so that Scripture might have its widest possible transforming influence. They also produced new editions of the Fathers, especially those who were regarded as helpful interpreters of the Bible's meaning. Their concern extended far beyond the upper classes and the well-educated. They were committed to providing resources for understanding the Bible for people of all vocations and all levels of society.

Calvin shared this commitment and it is key

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DAVID L. PUCKETT is Associate Vice President for Doctoral Studies and Professor of Church History at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Prior to coming to Southern Seminary, he served as Professor of Church History and Director of Th.M. and Ph.D. Studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and as founding headmaster of Trinity Academy of Raleigh, North Carolina. He previously taught historical theology at Dallas Theological Seminary and church history and theology at Criswell College. Dr. Puckett is the author of *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Westminster/John Knox, 1995).

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to understanding his work as a reformer, but his interest went beyond providing texts, translations, paraphrases, and new editions of the Fathers. He sought to provide commentary on the Bible and guidance for those who would be reading it.<sup>4</sup> This commitment bore its first fruit when Calvin published a small, but well-received, work in 1536—a work that would grow over the next two decades into his great *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

It was entirely consistent with Calvin's humanist background (and with his own retiring personality) that, following his conversion, he chose the written word as the means through which he would instruct God's people. He apparently intended to confine himself to a life of study and writing and planned to stay away from public ministry. But his desire to live a quiet writer's life was soon frustrated. Calvin described this in the preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms*, written late in his life: "God fastened upon me so many cords of various kinds that he never allowed me to remain quiet, and in spite of my reluctance dragged me into the limelight."<sup>5</sup>

It must have been the exceptional promise that the young Calvin had displayed as a writer that first drew the attention of the early reformers, William Farel and Martin Bucer. They pried a reluctant Calvin out of his study and into a public ministry of teaching and preaching. Calvin later reflected on his reluctance and Farel's insistence: "When [Farel] realized that I was determined to study in privacy in some obscure place, and saw that he gained nothing by entreaty, he descended to cursing, and said that God would surely curse my peace if I held back from giving help at a time of such great need."<sup>6</sup> When, after less than two years of ministry, he and Farel were expelled from Geneva, Calvin saw this was an opportunity to leave the ministry of the pulpit and lectern and plant himself again in his study. Then, he heard a familiar call, this time to service in Strasbourg: "I decided to live quietly as a private individual. But that most distinguished minister of Christ, Martin Bucer, dragged me back with the same curse

which Farel had used against me."<sup>7</sup> Calvin served in Strasbourg for three years—as pastor to a congregation of French refugees and lecturer on the Bible.<sup>8</sup> Then he was called once again to Geneva.

### TEACHING OFFICES

When Calvin returned to Geneva, it was to spend the rest of his life there—a life that would provide little opportunity for the peace and quiet he had believed necessary for his calling as a writer. He became the most public person in Geneva, and for over two decades was deeply engaged in almost every controversy in a very contentious society, all while preaching and teaching through the Bible. Upon his return to the city, he and the other ministers worked with the city leaders to draft the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, an agreement that outlined a new relationship between state and church. It also established a pattern for ministry through four ecclesiastical offices—pastor, doctor, elder, and deacon.

The teaching role was highlighted in the first two of these offices.<sup>9</sup> Pastors were "to proclaim the Word of God, to instruct, to admonish, exhort and censure, ... to administer the sacraments and to enjoin brotherly correction."<sup>10</sup> These activities were to take place in public and in private. Pastors were also expected to catechize. One of the key pastoral functions described in the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* was the teaching of children:

All citizens and inhabitants are to bring or convey their children on Sundays at midday to Catechism.... A definite formulary is to be composed by which they will be instructed, and on this, with the teaching given them, they are to be interrogated about what has been said, to see if they have listened and remembered well. When the child has been well enough instructed to pass the Catechism, he is to recite solemnly the sum of what it contains, and also to make profession of his Christianity in the presence of the Church.<sup>11</sup>

Calvin took a personal interest in the instruction

of children, providing a catechism in question and answer form<sup>12</sup> and a primer to be used in school for teaching the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles Creed, and the Ten Commandments, along with the alphabet.<sup>13</sup> As works of instruction for children, these catechetical works may be understood as fruit of Calvin's labor as pastor.<sup>14</sup>

The office of doctor (or teacher), as described in the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, was focused entirely on instruction and included none of the administrative or disciplinary functions of the pastoral office:

The office proper to doctors is the instruction of the faithful in true doctrine in order that the purity of the gospel be not corrupted either by ignorance or by evil opinions. As things are disposed today, we always include under this title aids and instructions for maintaining the doctrine of God and defending the Church from injury by the fault of pastors and ministers.<sup>15</sup>

The *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* refers to the office of doctor as the "order of the schools." It explains that the one in this office may be a "lecturer in theology" and it suggests that it will be good to have one in Old Testament and one in New Testament.<sup>16</sup> This office is especially focused on the task of preparing candidates for ministry. It involves both positive teaching and correction of error.<sup>17</sup> A lecture hall or schoolroom was to be a primary context for this ministry. To profit fully from the instruction of the doctors, knowledge of the biblical languages and of the humanities was needed, and this would best be gained in a school.<sup>18</sup> The purpose of the school was to prepare students for ministry (and to prepare some to be godly magistrates). It took almost two decades for Calvin's dream of an academy in Geneva to be realized. In the meantime, those preparing for Christian ministry in Geneva still needed training. This took place through in Geneva in a less formal way—through attendance at sermons in the city's churches, through attendance at lectures on the

Bible given by Calvin and others, through attendance at meetings of ministers and church leaders where there were lectures or discussions of doctrinal issues, and by reading Calvin's *Institutes*.

Through the offices of pastor and doctor, the instructional needs of every element of Genevan society would be provided for. The major distinction between the teaching roles of the two offices was this: the pastor was focused on teaching the congregation; the doctor was focused on teaching those who would teach the congregation. Randall Zachman sees the distinction as partly a distinction between particular and universal. While pastors have assignments to specific congregations, "doctors teach the universal church its essential dogmas and doctrines of piety, and defend such doctrines from error by preserving the true, simple, and genuine meaning of Scripture. Doctors have the responsibility for teaching future pastors, and for correcting any damage done to the church by faulty pastors."<sup>19</sup>

Calvin was called to both offices, but it is especially in his office as doctor that Calvin influenced the Christian community beyond his own lifetime. The literary products of that office, the *Institutes* and the biblical commentaries, are best understood as products of that office, both directed toward helping the reader read the Scriptures with understanding.

## THE INSTITUTES

The first edition of Calvin's *Institutes* was published in 1536, before he began his public ministry.<sup>20</sup> The definitive 1559 edition was an entirely different work, reflecting the study and experience of over two decades of ministry. Its growth from six chapters to eighty reflects a change in pedagogical purposes it was intended to serve. In its earliest form, the *Institutes* was intended to offer instruction for those who had recently been freed from the tyranny of the papacy. It may properly be thought of as reflecting Calvin's role as pastor. As a work of basic instruction, it served the function of a catechism, and catechizing for Calvin was, with

preaching, at the heart of the pastor's work.<sup>21</sup>

By 1541, while the function of the *Institutes* as a summary of Christian doctrine remained, its function as a guide for readers of the Bible had become prominent.

Although the holy scripture contains perfect teaching to which nothing can be added, because our Lord has chosen to unfold the infinite treasures of His wisdom in it; nevertheless, someone who does not have very much practice in using it needs some guidance and direction to know what to look for in it, in order not to go astray and wander here and there but to keep to a certain path, so as to arrive finally where the Holy Spirit calls him.... I exhort all who revere the word of the Lord to read this and impress it in their memory with diligence, if they want first to have a summary of Christian teaching and then an entry point to profit well in reading the Old as well as the New Testament.<sup>22</sup>

Later editions of the *Institutes* were clearly the product of Calvin's labor as doctor. He indicated that his purpose in writing it was "to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word."<sup>23</sup> The *Institutes* was, therefore, not intended to function as a stand-alone theology summary. It was not intended to replace lectures, sermons, or the personal reading of Scripture. Calvin expected the truth of what he said in the *Institutes* to be tested by others who were engaged in Bible study.

It is interesting that Calvin, who is better known for his theological work than for his biblical work, apparently never delivered lectures on theology as do modern academic theologians and as did the great scholastic theologians of the later Middle Ages. His *Institutes*, the work through which he has exercised such enormous influence on the theology of later generations, does not correspond to any of his known lectures. He did, however, lecture through much of the content of the Bible, and the fruit of that labor is preserved in

his biblical commentaries.

## THE COMMENTARIES

Calvin's commentaries were a written extension of his spoken ministry as doctor, mostly of the lectures delivered to ministerial candidates. Some were slightly edited transcriptions of his lectures, but even for those that were not first delivered as lectures, there was a close connection to Calvin's speaking ministry.

In 1540, during his ministry in Strasbourg, Calvin published his first biblical commentary, a commentary on Romans.<sup>24</sup> This was followed by an interval of six years in which no commentaries were issued, probably due to the urgency of pastoral and administrative tasks as he settled into his work in Geneva. The remainder of his commentaries on the epistles (1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter, James, 1 John, and Jude) were published over a five year period from 1546 to 1551. Calvin's commentary on Acts was issued in two parts (Acts 1-13 in 1552; Acts 14-28 in 1554). His commentary on John was published in 1553, followed by a commentary on a harmony of the Synoptic Gospels in 1555.<sup>25</sup>

Calvin's lectures on the Old Testament came later than most of his work on the New Testament. First came the lectures on Isaiah, delivered in the late 1540s; published in 1551. Through the early 1550's, he lectured on Genesis. These lectures were published in 1554. Through the mid-1550s he lectured on the Minor Prophets—lectures that were published in 1559. In 1559 and 1560, he lectured on Daniel; from 1560 to 1563, on Jeremiah and Lamentations. When he was consigned to his deathbed in 1564, he was in the middle of his lectures on Ezekiel. Each of these lecture series was published within a year or two of its conclusion.

Since Calvin lectured extemporaneously, he could provide no outline or notes to be used in the production of a commentary. His secretary, Nicholas des Gallars, came up with a workable

approach for preserving the lectures. Calvin lectured, des Gallars took notes, later read them back to Calvin, and made whatever changes he requested.<sup>26</sup> The system was later improved with three young scholars each taking down what Calvin said, comparing their notes, and producing a single version that recorded his words exactly. “They did not permit themselves to replace a single word by a better.” This document would be read to Calvin on the day following the lecture and he would make whatever changes he wished. He expressed amazement that the process worked as well as it did: “I would not have believed, unless I had seen it with my own eyes, how, when they read it back to me the next day, their transcriptions did not differ from my spoken words.... They recorded so faithfully what they heard me say that I can see no alteration.”<sup>27</sup> Calvin thought they may even have recorded his words too perfectly. “It might perhaps have been better if they had used greater liberty and deleted superfluities, arranged other things into a better order, and made yet others more distinct or more stylish.”<sup>28</sup> He was not entirely happy with them as published works. They were “bearable as lectures” but betrayed their extemporaneous origin and only reluctantly agreed to allow them to be published. Ironically, it is their lack of eloquence that suggests that these commentaries preserve the form of Calvin’s lectures, as well as their substance.

Calvin produced only three expositions of the Old Testament that were intended, from the first, to be published as commentaries. These were commentaries on the Psalms, Joshua, and a harmony of “The Last Four Books of Moses.” Apparently, he published his Psalms commentary somewhat reluctantly—at least in part, out of a fear that someone might publish the content of his lectures behind his back.<sup>29</sup> While they may not contain the form of Calvin’s oral teaching, they surely reflect the content of that teaching. The material for each commentary had been covered in weekly meetings of ministers and other interested persons.

In general, we can conclude that, there was a very close relationship between Calvin’s spoken ministry and his commentaries on the Bible. We can, accordingly, know through them much about the form and the substance of Calvin’s teaching ministry.

## CONCLUSION

The work for which Calvin is justifiably famous is his magnificent final edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. His reputation as a theologian rests upon this work, and it is mostly through it that Calvin’s influence has continued. In recent decades, however, the large collection of commentaries he produced has begun to receive long overdue attention.<sup>30</sup> These writings are crucial for understanding Calvin’s work as a teacher, because they preserve the daily component of Calvin’s spoken labor as he prepared students for ministry. Calvin came to recognize that the public ministry from which he had initially recoiled was, in fact, his calling. Having recognized that he was called by God to this labor, he faithfully assumed the offices of pastor and doctor, preaching and teaching the Word. His commentaries, with his *Institutes*, preserve very rich resource for those who share the calling to preach and teach. To benefit fully from Calvin’s ministry as teacher (or doctor), we should study these to use alongside his *Institutes*.<sup>31</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Mark A. Noll. *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 210.

<sup>2</sup>John C. Olin adopts this term for the title of his excellent collection of Erasmus’ writings: *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus* (New York: Fordham, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>Philipp Melancthon and Ulrich Zwingli were both, as young men, attached to the community of Christian humanists. Zwingli, especially, was a great admirer of Erasmus.

<sup>4</sup>An excellent discussion of Calvin’s intent that all

Christians be engaged in Bible reading is Randall C. Zachman's "Do You Understand What You Are Reading? Calvin's Guidance for Reading Scripture" in *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 55-76.

<sup>5</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin's Commentaries (Calvin Translation Society Edition, 1843-55; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979). This is from Calvin's preface.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 69.

<sup>9</sup>Calvin assumed both of these soon after he arrived in Geneva in 1536. Zachman, "Do You Understand What You Are Reading?" 58, citing Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin* (trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 108-09.

<sup>10</sup>Calvin's fourfold polity is fully developed and defended by the 1559 edition of his *Institutes*. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV.3.

<sup>11</sup>John Calvin, *Theological Treatises* (ed. J.K.S. Reid; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 69

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>13</sup>Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* (trans. Lyle D. Bierma; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 133.

<sup>14</sup>Catechisms were also used as tests of orthodoxy and, as such, they may be understood to reflect Calvin's other role—that of doctor.

<sup>15</sup>Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 62.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>17</sup>Much of Calvin's work has a strongly polemical character. Polemical sections abound in later editions of the *Institutes*. He fulfilled the Doctor's office as well in his famous *Reply to Sadoletto* (refuting the win- some appeal of the cardinal who sought to bring the Genevan church back into fellowship and submission to Rome), his *Psychopannychia* (refuting the doctrine of soul-sleep between death and the resurrection), his *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, with*

*an Antidote*, and his later writings against Lutheran polemicists in which he defended his view of the Lord's Supper.

<sup>18</sup>Calvin had seen a model for this type of school in Strasbourg academy led by Jacob Sturm.

<sup>19</sup>Zachman, "Do You Understand What You Are Reading?" 61. Zachman offers an excellent discussion of Calvin's goal of preparing Christians to read the Bible with understanding in his essay, "Do You Understand What You Are Reading?" 55-76.

<sup>20</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536 Edition* (trans. and annotated Ford Lewis Battles; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

<sup>21</sup>Even in its early form, the *Institutes* flows partly from Calvin's labor as doctor—defending the truth against error. This is at the case in the letter of dedication to Francis I, which is a sustained rebuttal of erroneous understandings of the evangelical message and the resulting false accusations.

<sup>22</sup>*Institutes of the Christian Religion: The First English Version of the 1541 French Edition* (trans. Elsie Anne McKee; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 3-4.

<sup>23</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (McNeill and Battles), 4.

<sup>24</sup>Calvin's commentary on Romans was not only his first commentary; it was, in his view, one of the more important: "If we have gained a true understanding of this Epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture" *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*. Vol. 8, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 8.

<sup>25</sup>Calvin's commentaries are extant for every portion of the New Testament except 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation. T. H. L. Parker argues convincingly that Calvin produced no commentaries on these three writings (*Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], 75ff.).

<sup>26</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, vol. 2, Calvin's Commentaries, preface by Nicholas des Gallars.

<sup>27</sup>Translation by T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1986), 27-28.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>29</sup>Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, preface.

<sup>30</sup>The modern study and appreciation of Calvin as a Bible scholar must be largely attributed to the work of T. H. L. Parker in his study of *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*. Parker later published a study of *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*.

<sup>31</sup>It is there that Calvin laid out what he saw as the main themes of Scripture. He speaks of the relationship between the *Institutes* and his commentaries in the opening letter to the reader of the *Institutes*: "If, after this road has, as it were, been paved, I shall publish any interpretations of Scripture, I shall always condense them, because I shall have no need to undertake long doctrinal discussions, and to digress into commonplaces. In this way the godly reader will be spared great annoyance and boredom, provided he approach Scripture armed with a knowledge of the present work, as a necessary tool" (*Institutes* [McNeill and Battles], 4-5).